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Jeffrey Epstein's donations to young pupils prompts US Virgin Islands review

Government to review corporate sponsorships after revelations that convicted sex offender and friend of Prince Andrew funded events for grade school pupils

Exhibit

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The government of the US Virgin Islands is to review its corporate sponsorships after it emerged that **Jeffrey Epstein**, the convicted sex offender and friend to Prince Andrew, gave gifts to school pupils and financed events for young children.

Epstein, who was jailed for soliciting girls as young as 14 for prostitution, funded a department of education science fair for grade school pupils on the islands in October last year. The 61-year-old paid to transport prize-winning children to the fair in St Thomas and funded their accommodation.

The Guardian has learned that Epstein's two Virgin Islands-based corporations have also funded a summer camp for children with intellectual disabilities, provided a prize for a school essay-writing competition, given computers to a pair of high-performing 14-year-old students who were heading to high school, and provided Kindle e-readers to a school library.

The former banker lives on Little St James, a private island among the US-controlled territory, where a woman who claims to have been Epstein's teenage "sex slave" alleged in a court filing last month she was forced to have sexual relations with Andrew. Buckingham Palace has strenuously denied this allegation.

Epstein is registered as a "Tier 1" sex offender with the US Virgin Islands department of justice, whose online database allows residents to view his photograph and details of his 11 cars. Shani Pinney, a department official, said on Monday that such offenders were barred from working or volunteering in schools and from "loitering on school property".

Epstein financed the science fair through his philanthropic foundation, which he has also used to donate to universities. In a statement, he described the event as "an exciting and important incentive for students" and said it was aimed at "awarding students for their impressive work". He also paid for more than 100 Microsoft Surface tablets for pupils to use.

Martin Weinberg, an attorney for Epstein, said in a statement: "Mr Epstein's philanthropy is heartfelt and decades old. He has donated to a wide myriad of charities, scientific initiatives, and education. These efforts have only a single objective - to help those in need, and in this case, students who in the Virgin Islands are in need of computers and other educational tools that provide them with a real opportunity to learn and succeed."

The manager of Epstein's companies is Cecile de Jongh, who until last week was also the first lady of the US Virgin Islands. Her husband, John, served two terms as governor from 2007 until this year. The administration of the new governor, Kenneth Mapp, who took office last week, said that it first learned of Epstein's involvement in the education system from a Guardian inquiry on Monday.

Kimberly Jones, a spokeswoman for Mapp, said the administration would be reassessing sponsorship deals. "Every situation is going to be reviewed individually," Jones said on Monday. "It is important to note that this all happened under the previous administration".

Epstein served 13 months in jail after signing a controversial plea agreement with the US government. The FBI is said to have identified about 40 potential victims of the former investment banker.

In a filing in a US court last month, Virginia Roberts alleged that she was made to engage sexually with Andrew at Epstein's Virgin Islands property, as well as locations in London and New York. Epstein had previously been accused by attorneys for alleged victims of using the island property for orgies with young female associates.

In addition to denying the allegation, Buckingham Palace has stressed that Andrew is not a party to the lawsuit, which is filed at a federal court in Florida, and therefore is not able to directly dispute Roberts's claim.

Jones said that Governor Mapp, an independent, was monitoring the disclosures about Epstein "very carefully". She said on Monday: "I can't speak for the governor, but if it were up to me, there are certain people who would not be able to get on airplanes and travel here."

Epstein's company for several years also funded a basketball tournament on the US Virgin Islands for children as young as six. Boyd Tobman, one of the organisers of the tournament, said on Monday that Epstein's sponsorship would no longer be welcomed.

"I only read about his conviction a couple of days ago and wasn't previously aware of it," said Tobman. "I wouldn't be happy with someone like that being involved and I don't think we will be asking them for sponsorship again." Tobman later said that a final decision would need to be reached with his fellow tournament organisers.

Reached by telephone on Monday, John De Jongh declined to answer questions about Epstein. "I'm out of office now," he said. De Jongh did not respond to an email and online message requesting comment. De Jongh's spokesman as governor did not respond to a request for comment. Cecile de Jongh did not respond to a message left with her office. Several US Virgin Islands education officials responsible for overseeing the science fair declined to comment.

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